

WHY ENGLAND AND FRANCE INTERVENED

Was the Soviet Timetable Upset?

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THE month that failed to shake the world is over. As I write in mid-November, "order" of a sort reigns in Hungary, while in Egypt the ruling military clique must ponder the dangers of embarking on a fresh round. For the moment, the Middle Eastern and the East European upheavals show no sign of merging into a general crisis involving all the powers. Such a merger may yet occur if the reports are true which speak of mounting Soviet intervention in certain Arab states, with the prospect of a fresh outbreak of fighting next spring. Whether or not the present pause is of long or short duration, it enables one to take breath.

One conclusion can already be drawn: the Hungarian catastrophe and the Anglo-French intervention in Egypt were only externally connected. Their mutual interaction was nonetheless so pronounced that at one moment it seemed Moscow might tolerate a semi-independent regime in Budapest, in the interest of reinforcing the hue and cry against Britain and France. In the event, the Kremlin decided to crush the Hungarian rebellion by force. Had it done otherwise, Hungary might have been lost to the Soviet bloc, but Soviet intervention in the Middle East would have been more effective, and might have gone beyond diplomatic bluster

and talk of sending "volunteers." In this sense it is arguable that the East European upheaval threw the Russian timetable out of gear, and correspondingly spoiled Nasser's chances of assembling the forces of the Pan-Arab bloc for a war of revenge on Israel, to be followed by the seizure of the oil pipelines and the launching of a military drive against Britain and France. "Is it inconceivable," wrote an influential British commentator in the Conservative *Daily Telegraph*, "that a future Macaulay will write that the workers of Poland and Hungary saved Israel from annihilation and Europe from impoverishment?"

For the moment such questions are unanswerable. It may also be suspected that they contain an element of apologetic self-defense concerning the sudden and surprising Anglo-French intervention against Nasser. Yet even at the start of the crisis it was evident that Israel had triggered something much bigger and more complex than an attempt to "police" the chief Middle Eastern danger zone. There is little point in debating whether Britain and France were motivated by foreknowledge that Israel, in Churchill's phrase, was about to "erupt against Egypt." The relevant fact is that they seized on the Sinai outbreak in order to bring Nasser under control. In so doing they incidentally robbed the Israelis of some of the political and moral fruits of their brief, brilliant campaign. From Israel's viewpoint, a steady supply of arms from France, plus Anglo-French action in the Security Council to counter the pro-Egyptian bias of the majority, would probably have been preferable to what has in fact occurred.

Israel's preferences, however, cannot have weighed very heavily in London and Paris. Here the clash between Egypt and Israel

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was viewed as an opportunity to restore the threatened balance in the Middle East—and not merely in terms of re-occupying the Suez Canal, in order to give the Western powers a bargaining point in the negotiations over its eventual control. To claim this would be too cynical and would overlook the genuine alarm of the two Western governments in the face of mounting evidence that the Nasser regime was converting Egypt into a Soviet satellite. Not all the facts were known when the Anglo-French ultimatum was launched, but enough was suspected to make London and Paris feel that time was running short. By next spring, Nasser might have had the initiative all along the line.

These considerations could not be openly avowed—least of all in the United Nations, where the Afro-Asian bloc stood ready to protect Nasser against Western intervention. Hence the discrepancy between the real motives of Anglo-French policy and the official reasons given to a bewildered public: that the combatants must be separated, British and French civilians protected, the Canal kept open, oil supplies secured, and the United Nations shocked into action. The fact that some of these explanations were patently absurd has obscured the truth that London and Paris were genuinely fearful of a general war which would give the Russians an even bigger foothold in the Levant. In this sense the talk of “taking police action” was sincere, though it outraged not merely Marshal Bulganin’s sensitive conscience, but the legalistic morality of countless indignant critics who demanded to be told by what authority Eden and Mollet had sent out their sheriff’s posse. It would of course have been useless to say that there was no hope of getting a warrant from the judge—if this title adequately describes the General Assembly of the United Nations—in advance of evidence that Nasser was really the culprit: evidence which is now beginning to accumulate, though to the Afro-Asian bloc it is not conclusive. The mere fact of having planned to launch war next spring with Soviet aid is no great crime to most Asian or Arab nationalists.

THAT such plans were in progress is not really doubted even by domestic critics of the action taken by the British and French governments. Egypt and Syria had for months been prepared as Soviet bridgeheads in the Middle East. Shut out in the north by the Turkish link with NATO, able to reach the Mediterranean only through the bottleneck of the Dardanelles, the USSR has been trying to break through the Western cordon by utilizing the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arms and technicians were sent to Egypt and Syria not merely for their own forces, but for Soviet “volunteers” who might in time find their way to these two countries. The timetable probably hinged on the speed with which Egypt, Syria, and Jordan could be brought into action against Israel. Thereafter, the seizure of the Arabian pipelines was to have triggered the long prepared action against the pro-Western regime in Iraq—a country wholly dependent on oil revenues.

Israel sprang the trap before it could close. In so doing its leaders gave Britain and France the opportunity to destroy part of Nasser’s military build-up. It is probable, however, that this objective did not rank high among the original aims of Anglo-French policy. It is only now, after the event, that British spokesmen are laying stress on the damage done to airfields already prepared for the use of Soviet planes (most of which seem to have got out to neighboring countries before the bombardment started). It is even suggested that the five-day preliminary air attack was calculated to make large-scale Soviet intervention more difficult. This is mere hindsight. The real purpose of the long-drawn-out bombardment was quite simple: to minimize casualties after landing. In the event, the Allied intervention accomplished less than it might have done if the troops had been put ashore with greater speed, and allowed to occupy the whole length of the Canal before Britain and France were forced to call a halt to the operation. Half-heartedness in planning and execution helped to cripple an enterprise which otherwise might have gone down as

a successful, though illegal, *coup de force*. If that should turn out to be the net result, history's verdict on the British and French governments will be harsh. But it is unlikely that a full balance sheet will soon be made public. Too many facts are hidden, and will continue to remain hidden while the international situation is as tense as it is now.

Some of the information amassed by the British and French governments about Soviet preparations for a politico-military take-over in the Middle East is now being made public. But important aspects of the situation remain obscure. To cast light on them might involve disclosing some of the most carefully guarded secrets of the Khrushchev-Bulganin visit to Britain last spring. From the semi-official hints scattered at the time, it was inferred that the Soviet leaders had been warned against actions likely to trigger a world war—actions connected with the Middle East, and in particular with Britain's oil supplies. Certainly they were left in no doubt that there was a point beyond which the Western powers could not be pushed without some risk of war. If they chose to make Nasser their stalking horse in the Middle East, they must have done so in the belief that such warnings could be disregarded as long as the United States was not committed to any particular course of action. Indeed, judging from the recent behavior of the Soviet leaders, they seem to have felt for a moment that there was perhaps a chance of joint Soviet-American action to expel Britain and France from the Middle East—a contingency now described as "unthinkable" by President Eisenhower.

Here if anywhere lies the political justification for what must otherwise rank as a desperate gamble on the part of America's two senior European allies: even though they are mere shadows of their former selves, Britain and France may, by their joint action against Nasser, have upset the Soviet timetable and simultaneously impelled the United States government to abandon the fence-straddling position it has occupied during the reign of Mr. Dulles (concerning whom it is tempting, though perhaps un-

feeling, to recall Lloyd George's quip about a colleague: "He has been sitting on the fence for so long that the iron has entered into his soul"). Certainly London and Paris had it in mind not merely to galvanize the United Nations into action—an aim which seems actually to have been achieved, though at some cost to international morality during the preliminary stage—but also to serve notice on the U.S. administration that Britain and France do not regard themselves as expendable. That they were so regarded in Washington is perhaps open to doubt; what cannot be doubted is that the Dulles reign allowed this impression to spread among the most responsible British and French officials, and in political circles as widely different in sympathies and instinctive attitudes as British Conservatives and French Socialists. It was left to the Alsops to write in their column (in the *New York Herald Tribune* of November 7) that Britain and France acted as they did because of "their conviction that the American government had already behaved toward them with something really like perfidy."

THE dangers, the pressures, and the frustrations which in the end produced this state of mind have now been exposed to the light of day. If they do not altogether excuse a half-hearted stroke of violence that may prove self-defeating, they at any rate help to explain the motivations underlying it. Not least among them was an impression that the USA and the USSR were engaged in competing for the favors of some of the most destructive forces let loose in the modern world; not just nationalist movements in general, but nationalist regimes such as that of Nasser in Egypt: the dictatorship of a mentally unbalanced military clique with warlike expansionist aims—aims incompatible with the rule of law in a much more profound sense than anything arising out of the so-called "police action" undertaken by the British and French governments without international sanction. The now fashionable American retort that Washington has merely been trying to restrain its

European Allies from relapsing into "colonial" habits of mind fails to impress people who have watched a Tory government evacuate Egypt, and successive French governments concede virtual independence to Morocco and Tunisia. Evidently something else was at stake.

That something is not difficult to define. It has to do with the manner in which Afro-Asian nationalism has been exploited by the Soviet Union and turned into a battering ram against Western interests which by any standard—conservative, liberal, or socialist—are perfectly legitimate. As someone has remarked, it would not have made the slightest difference to the conflict between the British government and Nasser over the Suez Canal if Britain had been a fully socialized country with its oil industry under state control. The fashionable Afro-Asian claptrap about "capitalist imperialism" breaks down in the face of mounting evidence that a good deal of the nationalist ferment now running through the emergent countries—though fortunately not all of it—is radically hostile to the West *as such*. Because of the political immaturity of Afro-Asian nationalism, and because of its voting strength in the United Nations, the General Assembly must be expected, on any major issue, to defend Afro-Asian nationalist pretensions against what little rule of law is left in the world.

Nor is there much hope, at any rate in the short run, of turning this sentiment against the Soviet Union by exposing the Kremlin's brutal contempt for national aspirations in its own satellite empire. For Afro-Asian moral sentiment is highly selective, and its real yardsticks are racial and political. Just as Asian Communists are unable to understand the fuss made by their European and American comrades about Stalin's crimes, so Asian nationalists are indifferent to Soviet atrocities so long as they are directed against Europeans. The Hungarian blood-bath provoked little, belated vocal indignation in Asia, where on the contrary a tremendous protest storm greeted the Anglo-French intervention in Egypt.

WHILE this state of mind lasts—and it is evidently going to last for quite some time—one cannot expect the United Nations to hold the balance fairly between the national aspirations of the emergent peoples and the permanent interests of the world community. It is only too likely that from time to time some destructive force will try to capitalize on national immaturity, and that in such cases the United Nations will be unwilling or powerless to act—as indeed in the case of Egypt it has proved to be.

This is not to say that military intervention by countries which still try to defend liberal standards is justifiable—it is in fact self-contradictory, and for that reason alone had better not be undertaken. The most that can be claimed on behalf of the British and French governments is that in a desperate emergency they decided to commit a breach of international law in the interest of preventing something a great deal worse. That much, however, must be conceded to them, unless one is to sink to the level of immaturity which expresses itself by howling "colonialist." International life today is not so simple as all that.

On the whole these issues have been more readily understood in France than in Britain, and not merely for the obvious reason that French opinion—apart from the Communists—was almost solidly united in regarding Nasser as a menace. It is probably true to say that the French are indifferent to the Anglo-Saxon brand of moralistic-legalistic reasoning on public affairs. Indeed the habit of discussing political relations in moral terms is regarded by most Frenchmen as a piece of characteristically Anglo-Saxon imbecility, if not as a sinister instance of national hypocrisy. Canting moralists are as rare in France as they are plentiful in Britain—which is not to say that political principles play no part: there is, for example, at the moment a good deal of solidarity in France with the threatened republic of Israel—a sentiment notably different from ordinary political calculation. There is likewise acceptance of the principles embodied in the United Nations charter. But adher-

ence to the charter is not interpreted to mean that its substance must invariably be sacrificed to the whims of a fluctuating majority in the General Assembly. The French may be uneasy because their government found itself temporarily in disfavor with the majority, but they do not consider that MM. Mollet and Pineau thereby committed an unforgivable crime.

THE British reaction has been different—not least because Britain had a larger stake in the Middle East and has lost a good deal more in material as well as in moral terms. The economic balance sheet alone is bad enough, and to it has to be added the virtual expulsion of Britain from the Baghdad Pact and the unleashing of Arab hostility throughout the area. The Opposition could hardly be expected to take all this lying down, on the plea that peace had to be restored, the Canal safeguarded, or the United Nations brought into action—all highly unconvincing explanations. But the explosion of rage which swept a considerable part of the British middle class—there is plentiful evidence that the working class was relatively indifferent to the issues which excited the articulate section of the public—contained a large ingredient of moral self-hypnosis. It has become the fashion since the war to claim for Britain a degree of moral leadership to which no country can attain in this sinful world, and which the United Kingdom certainly never exercised (as the *London Times* bluntly pointed out in an impressive editorial on November 12). In the political mythology of most liberals and Labor supporters, Sir Anthony Eden is the man who by his reckless folly has deprived Britain of her exalted standing among the nations—an amiable fantasy unrelated to the true state of affairs, but as such a powerful motive force of protest movements among a large and important stratum of the British middle class. Hence the almost unparalleled scenes in the House of Commons, where indeed the Labor party in the end overreached itself by forcing the Prime Minister to speak against such a furi-

ous barrage of screams, boos, catcalls, and crude personal abuse that the Conservatives were angered into closing ranks behind him. It was essentially a protest movement by, and on behalf of, the liberal intelligentsia and those sections of the public whom it manages to influence, and its chief effect has been to persuade an important fraction of the electorate that the country will be safer under Mr. Gaitskell than under Eden.

As a demonstration of the continued strength of Protestant-liberal morality among the British middle and professional classes, it was impressive. Anyone responsive to the plea that international politics should be conducted in terms of individual morality must have had his or her withers wrung during the past month. To people not so constituted, the "stage army of the good" looked faintly ridiculous as it paraded around the scene with its banners, its pacifist slogans, its appeals to the United Nations to do something about Egypt (and of course about Hungary too, though Hungary seemed to matter less), and its strident demands for the immediate resignation of Sir Anthony Eden, that man of blood. Possibly the whole furor is evidence that the British are still sound at heart; certainly it disclosed that a good many liberal intellectuals are a little soft in the head. But then that is not exactly a new discovery.

Let the *Times* have the last word:

A deeper answer would be to observe to those who lament that Sir Anthony Eden's action has lost Britain the moral leadership of the free world, that . . . since the war, outside the one field of colonial emancipation, she never had it. Britain, for instance, did as little about the 1950 United Nations resolution regarding the passage of Israeli ships through the Canal as anyone else. Britain showed as little imaginative leadership in the long wrangle over disarmament as any other nation. Britain's moves towards helping Europe consolidate herself have often been too late. . . . A nation cannot lose what it has never had.

To which one may say "Amen"—and perhaps add that it would be well if the responsible spokesmen of other nations were equally self-critical.